
**You and Your Action Research
Project
Second Edition**

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Disseminate the findings

This involves making the research process and its findings available to wider audiences so that it can now count as public knowledge. The above are features common to all kinds of research.

How is action research different from other kinds of research?

Action research is different from other kinds of research in the following ways.

It is practitioner based

Action research is conducted by practitioners who regard themselves as researchers. It is therefore also called practitioner research, practitioner-led research and practitioner-based research. It is also called action enquiry. (Action learning is different, although the distinctions between action research and action learning have become increasingly blurred. Action research involves making public an explanatory account of practice.) In health and social care contexts, terms such as 'user-research' or 'service-user-led research' are used (see Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001). The practitioner base to action research means that all people in all contexts who are investigating the situation they are in can become researchers, regardless of their age, status, social setting, or social or professional positioning. The situations may be in virtually any context – in the workplace, in the home, in an aeroplane – and in any personal or professional arena. Because action research is always done by practitioners within a particular social situation, it is insider research (not outsider research), which means that the researcher is inside the situation, and will inevitably influence what is happening.

In some forms of interpretive action research, however, people believe it is appropriate for an external researcher to stand outside the situation and watch others doing their action research. The external researcher then writes about the situation, checking his or her interpretations with participants. While this book includes an interpretive perspective, it is written out of a value that participants should evaluate their own practices rather than try to evaluate someone else's.

It focuses on learning

Action research is about individuals' learning, in company with other people. People are always in relation with others in some way. Relation-

ships are important, because an improvement in personal practice usually involves a deeper understanding of oneself in relation with others.

Action research is different from social scientific research which aims to understand and describe an external situation. Action research is a process that helps you, a practitioner, to develop a deeper understanding about what you are doing as an insider researcher. Action research has both a personal and a social aim. The personal aim is the improvement of your own learning, while the social aim is an improvement of your situation. Both are equally important and interdependent. Your report is an account of how your learning developed through studying your practice within the situation, and how your learning influenced the situation. It does not matter if the social situation does not reach successful closure; it probably will not because any solution allows new questions to emerge. What does matter is that you show your own process of learning, and explain how your new learning has helped you to develop your work within the situation. (Unfortunately, some agencies that support action research these days expect concrete 'outcomes' in terms of externally imposed targets, a trend that potentially constrains learning and distorts the research process – see Introduction.)

It embodies good professional practice, and goes beyond

When people do action research for the first time they often say, 'This is what I do in any case.' To an extent, this is so. We act, reflect on our actions, and modify our practice in the light of what we learn. This is good professional practice, which emphasises the action (often problem solving), but it is not action research. Action research is more than problem solving, and involves identifying the reasons for the action which are related to the researcher's values, and gathering and interpreting data to show that the reasons and values were justified and fulfilled. Good professional practice emphasises the action but does not always question the motives. To be action research, there must be praxis which embodies practice. Praxis is informed, committed action that gives rise to knowledge as well as successful action. It is informed because other people's views and feelings are taken into account. It is committed and intentional in terms of values that have been examined and may be argued.

It can lead to personal and social improvement

We said in the Introduction that we believe people (severe pathology aside) are capable of learning (to be more precise, they are incapable of not learning), and should accept the responsibility of thinking and acting

for themselves, starting by focusing on their own practice within their situation. This means that people commit to evaluating their own work and finding ways of improving it with a view to influencing others. Self-evaluation enables people to hold themselves accountable for what they think and do. The idea of social change is embodied in the processes of groups of individuals who are committed to changing the way they think and act. Individual practitioners can become dynamic change agents who can generate wide-scale social change by working together. Action research is a form of personal enquiry, but it is always done collaboratively because it involves individuals working together to achieve commonly agreed goals.

It is responsive to social situations

People do action research when they want to investigate what is happening in their particular situation and try to improve it. They not only observe and describe what is happening; they also take action. They begin by trying to understand how they are positioned within their particular situation, and whether what they are doing is in accord with their values. They try to understand how they might improve what they are doing, on the assumption that their decision to improve the situation, beginning with themselves, will enable them to influence others in their contexts, in accordance with their values. They do not aim to change other people. They aim to change themselves by questioning what they are doing, evaluating it rigorously, and explaining to others how their personal improvement can contribute to social improvement.

It demands high order questioning

They begin this process by questioning the assumptions that underlie their practice and their situation. Action research may not be problem solving (bringing an investigation to closure), but it does imply problem posing (or problematising); that is, not accepting things at face value. This involves questioning at several levels. These levels are often called 'first, second and third order learning'. First order learning refers to learning about a situation: for example, 'How many women managers are in the firm?' Second order learning is learning to question what has been learned: 'How can we involve more women managers?' Third order learning is learning to ask why the situation is as it is, and why one might need to change the way one thinks about it: 'Why is it necessary to ask questions about the involvement of women managers in the first place?' Developing this type of critical perspective means recognising that situations are not 'given', but are created by people with particular intentions over time. The research project might unearth issues which seemingly

have nothing to do with its original aims, yet are important to understanding the situation with a view to changing it.

It is intentionally political

Deciding to take action is itself a political act, because what one person does invariably has consequences for someone else. Action researchers need to understand that they are frequently in potentially politically contested scenarios. When practitioners begin to question the current and historical contexts of a situation, and perhaps begin to reveal injustices, they have to make decisions about whether they wish to follow their own value commitments and try to improve the situation according to what they believe in, or whether they will go along with the status quo. These are difficult decisions to make and can involve personal discomfort. The affirmation that one has contributed to social development, however, can be a powerful incentive to act in the interests of social justice.

The focus is on change, and the self is the locus of change

Situations do not change themselves. People change, and they change their situations. Change begins in people's minds, so that when people decide to do something about their work, they set up a process of personal change (individual learning) that can transform into a process of social change (collective learning). Traditional kinds of research usually stop at the level of describing a situation. They sometimes go on to suggest ways in which the situation might be changed. Action researchers take action, and begin by asking, 'What can I do? How do I do it?'

Practitioners accept responsibility for their own actions

In traditional types of research, researchers usually carry out what is required by someone else, such as policy makers or funders. They may make decisions about research procedures, but they do not make decisions about the aims of the research. Action researchers make their own decisions about what is important and what they should do. This is a massive responsibility, because researchers then base their decisions for action on how they understand what is good, and how they think the world should be. They use their values as the basis for their action. Because this is such a massive responsibility they always need to check whether theirs are justifiable values, whether they are living in the direction of their values, and whether their influence is benefiting other people in ways that those other people also feel are good. This involves highly rigorous evaluation checks and restraints, to make sure that action researchers can justify, and do not abuse, their potential influence.

It emphasises the values base of practice

Action research begins with practitioners becoming aware of what is important to them – their values – and how they might act in the direction of those values. Action research is value laden, which differs from the neutral stance claimed for some other types of research. Action research becomes a process of living in a way that practitioners feel is right. This has serious implications for issues of justification and validation of research findings (see Chapters 9 and 10).

How can action research be understood as a new form of scholarship?

Since the 1940s, considerable shifts have been taking place in the knowledge base of social and education research. The term 'knowledge base' refers to ideas about what counts as knowledge, how the knowledge is tested to ensure its validity, and what it looks like in terms of its products. This has considerable implications for who counts as a knower, and why.

From about the 1940s, and for a long time before that, though less noticeably so, movements had been afoot to dislodge the stranglehold of traditional approaches that emphasised technical rational forms of knowing. These movements appeared as new forms of research that were qualitative rather than only quantitative; new areas of investigation appeared that were concerned with human experience rather than only behavioural performance; and practitioners as well as intellectuals came to be regarded as researchers. These new, more inclusive forms of research concentrated on understanding the relationships among people, and between people and their environments. They used methodologies that offered descriptions and explanations of the experience of practice, instead of aiming to predict and control potential outcomes. Research was no longer a search for one objective Truth, but the creation of multiple truths that communicated varieties of pluralistic and democratic living. Practitioners were now acknowledged as legitimate knowledge workers. Democracy in research was coming of age.

These different traditions have been variously described as 'old' and 'new' paradigm research, and the 'old' and 'new' scholarship. There is little difference between what the terms communicate, and they are used interchangeably in this book. What continues to be interesting are the attitudes of researchers working in the different traditions. While most people get along amicably, serious hostilities can break out when people feel their territory is threatened, understandably enough, because for many people territory symbolises intellectual and physical property, and therefore status and income.

Action research is part of the new scholarship. It emphasises the idea of knowledge generation as creative practice that evolves through dialogue. It recognises knowledge not only as an outcome of cognitive activity, but also as embodied; that is, mind and body are not perceived as separate entities but as integrated. Knowledge is arrived at, and exists in, feelings and multiple sensory modes. Consequently knowledge exists as much 'in here' as 'out there'.

The new scholarship covers many different disciplines and areas of enquiry, but its significance and implications are far-reaching. Human enquiry and now moved to finding better ways of living together to sustain ourselves and the planet, and recognises that social and environmental well-being can happen only when individual people make deliberate commitments to working together to achieve their democratically negotiated goals.

We continue these themes in Chapter 2, and offer a summary of the main features of action research.